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Blackhand



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Chapter 1 by Jayde Avalon

Anedel nocks her arrow and takes careful aim. Her prey is walking leisurely beside the river, absorbing the sights and sounds of evening, oblivious of his hidden predator. Her body tenses and her breath slows to a halt as she prepares to fire. The wicked arrowhead points at the target's neck, all too ready to take hold and release its poison. Her grip is with fingertips now, weakening, weakening—and she fires.

The arrow plunges into the river.

He leaps aside with unnerving agility, dodging the lethal arrow as it hums past his gently pointed ear. Drawing his own bow, he aims in her general direction. Where is she, he wonders?

Blast. These thrice-accursed Elves and their razor-sharp hearing—oh, how she hates them, Anedel grumbles silently. Quietly setting aside her bow, she crouches, her corded back muscles stretching taut, her legs spring-loaded and tense. Her blood thrums in her ears, and her muscles burn from sitting motionless in the tree for so long. She takes a deep breath. The silence is deafening—the forest seems to hold its breath, waiting...

And she flies like a spear.

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Chapter 2 by Phantim

Later that night she returns to her room. The door is open and her master is waiting in the foyer along with the head of her order of assassins, Lord Greyjoy. She gives the

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two men a small bow, and then with a grin, rolls a bloody bag at their feet. A servant runs over and picks it up.

"My mission was successful," she says confidently.

The servant opens up the bag and lifts a severed head from within. The master appraises it, giving special attention to the pointed ears.

"Well done Blackhand! The Elven prince is dead... no small feat. Especially for a human," he jeers. His hand subconsciously rises to touch his own pointed ear. "You have passed your final test, and without a scratch it seems. A feat, even your own master, Sir Typhis could not accomplish. Well done indeed... I had little doubt however. Come now child, the ceremony has already been prepared. It is time for you to become more than you are... more than a hand."

"You honor me Lord Greyjoy," the Blackhand says. She flits her lashes at him, flirtingly.

Her own master gives her a grave look, not approving of her boldness. Perhaps he was tinged by a bit of jealousy as well. He was not happy to share his apprentice with Lord Greyjoy. It had been difficult however, to keep such beauty and talent hidden. Now he was even praising her over himself. This was most inappropriate behavior, Sir Typhis thought. /Most inappropriate indeed/.

Chapter 3 by Stan Johnson



Lord Aleman Greyjoy was a practical man. It's how one survived when one was held the reins of an organization composed of trained killers. Once he had accepted the fact that his life may end at any given moment, he found that leading the assassins guild was actually surprisingly easy if you simply knew where to put pressure and when.

Right now, a light touch was all he needed to keep Oswald Typhis off balance. Typhis hadn't been terribly subtle about his desire to unseat Greyjoy, and that had been a shame. The man was actually quite the accomplished assassin; he had all the scars to prove it, and at the price of

only his left little finger. A pity that a mere woman would be the downfall of Greyjoy's star pupil.

He sighed, nursing a small misgiving. Oswald Typhis already had a plan in place to kill him and that was fine - Greyjoy was a hard man to kill. What he wanted was to ensure that

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his successor didn't try to murder him, and would let him go in relative peace; or, at least who wouldn't hunt him down and torture him for what he may or may not know.

The human woman will do nicely, he thought as he crossed into his study. The woman's induction ceremony would wait for him as long as he wished it. Making his subordinates sweat and wonder was all part of the game. *Typhis must see what I am trying to do, but as long as the Blackhand appears to be a threat, he'll take pains to neutralize her. Even if he doesn't get sloppy, it'll tie up his resources keeping track of her. He never did know how to run his spies.*

Reaching the small, plain wooden door of his study, the elven assassin lord snapped his fingers once. A moment later, a servant appeared from around a corner, dressed in the same finery one would expect from a servant of a titled individual. "My lord?" the man queried.

"The Blackhand--Anedel Alariack. Bring her back at once." The servant bowed curtly and whirled to comply.

"And," Greyjoy added, causing the servant to hesitate, "carefully hint that she may want to change into something... provocative."

The servant frowned, thoughtfully, nodding more slowly this time. Then he bowed again. "It will be done," he added, before scurrying away.

*

The freshman killer sauntered, more than walked, into Greyjoy's study, not ten minutes later. He'd expected her efficiency, and knew that, had she not taken time to hastily change her attire and add some light cosmetics, she would have arrived almost before the servant had found her.

Lady Alariack's hood was still up, her pert face shadowed just above her nose. He took her in with the barest of glances; he'd seen it before a thousand times, if he'd seen it at all--the young human, thinking the world of himself or herself. Humans were sufficiently nuanced in their own right, but when you lived as long as an elf, you caught on to the patterns soon enough. The males

always playing the tough, or the undetectable blade, while the females either flaunted their femininity or fought to erase it from the world. The Blackhand was the former.

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"You wanted to see me?" She asked, her voice a low, husky purr. "Delaying my induction ceremony?" She doffed her hood and leaned forward just enough to give the impression that she

was being inquisitive, yet still providing what was meant to be a tantalizing glimpse of her femininity.

Greyjoy suppressed the sigh, and instead allowed his eyes to dilate slightly as they followed the carefully crafted lines of her bodice, just the way he knew she would expect him to. She, in turn, shifted her position ever so slightly as to continue to lure him in. He let her think he was taking the bait. He even went so far as to clear his throat and stammer. "L-Lady Alariack, thank you for coming so quickly."

"A *pleasure* my Lord."

Greyjoy groaned inwardly, but continued the act. "You may have noticed that your mentor, Sir Typhis, has taken notice of your, shall we say, talent."

"He's taken notice of a few *other* things as well," she said, stepping lightly across the room and perching on the end of one of the chairs facing his desk. Once again, she leaned forward, head cocked as if listening carefully. It was *so* disappointing that she was so predictable. Were it not for her obvious skills in the killing arts, the master assassin would have personally seen to it that she'd have been dismissed to a brothel some time ago.

"Ahem," Greyjoy continued, "yes. But, business."

"Always, of course," and she batted her lashes again.

Greyjoy did her the favor of looking appropriately flustered. "I'll be straightforward. We all know that trust is a non-existent commodity in our line of work. I do not for a moment trust you; if you aren't already planning to murder me, then you should be, and you should be planning on murdering Sir Typhis as well, since he thinks himself next in line for my chair."

"I would *never* entertain such a notion, my Lord," Alariack continued. "The Blackhand lives to do her master's bidding," and she drew out the last few words, even as she reclined in the chair in a most inviting way

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"I need you to use your talents—all of them," and he heard her purr, "to keep his attention elsewhere."

"So he can take me to bed and put a knife through my heart?" she mocked, quirked an eyebrow.

"I like to take care of my tools," Greyjoy responded, clipping the words to just the right length to sound nervous. "You are too valuable to lose to internal politics."

"And I bet my Lord knows *all* about internal politics." Her tone was sickeningly seductive, and he began to wonder whether he had made a mistake in bringing her here. She *had* to be more mature and intelligent than *this*; than to think that her human games would truly work on a seasoned elf. Then again, the human mind was so trapped in its limited time frame that it seemed they lived to eat, mate, and die. Perhaps Alariack's flaws were merely the natural state of her species, rather than a fault in her training and intelligence.

He cleared his throat again and rose quickly. "I do, of course. I will protect you from my protégé, and I will, of course, reward you handsomely for the deeds you carry out. No one is to know of this assignment. I will need to cease showing you any particular favoritism, though I will refrain from overt shaming or torture by the same token. We shall not be seen together in public unless circumstances absolutely warrant it. Our communications will be predominantly via missive unless..." and he let his voice trail off as his eyes took in her lithe, human form, "unless I specifically summon you." He forced himself to swallow hard, and he could see in her eyes a sense of quietly satiated triumph. For all she knew, Lord Aleman Greyjoy had been carefully wound around her little finger.

"And," she asked, amused, "I have leave to do whatever is necessary, short of killing him?"

Greyjoy nodded.

"Resources?"

"Anything you need, my lady," he replied.

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She stalked lithely toward him, and he averted his eyes as if ashamed. Anedel Alariack ran a finger lightly across his jaw and down his chest. "I look forward to doing business with you, my Lord."

"Indeed. You are dismissed."

She leaned in for a long moment, face hovering almost close enough to share his breath, and then, with a faint, wicked grin, lightly exited the room, exaggerating the motion of her hips as she departed, pulling the door closed behind her. Greyjoy sat simply in his chair, releasing the pent up groan. Had he not followed her studies and training, he might believe that Anedel Alriack truly *was* a one-dimensional character of a human woman. But no, she, too, had been playing games with him, and he'd played along, acting the way she expected males to act.

At the end of the day, however, he knew the game was afoot. Typhis would likely learn of the meeting by the following morning (even *his* spies weren't *that* inept), and all would be in motion.

Allowing himself a small smile, he made himself some tea.

Chapter 4 by Stan Johnson



Anedel held her poise until the door to her private quarters had been bolted behind her, and the shutters chained in place. Then, she crossed calmly to her bed, laid face first on a supple pillow, and *screamed*.

By the deities that was disgusting she thought, replaying the events of Lord Greyjoy's study. *And he probably didn't even buy it.*

She roes and cast aside her skimpy attire, which Greyjoy's servant had been less than subtle about suggesting. Reaching for her washbasin, she dabbed off the cosmetic powder she'd hastily applied (and done a good job of it, all things considered), then gave herself a quick sponge bath; it helped reduce the lingering sensation that she was covered in a thin film of Greyjoy's slime.

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She shook the thought from her head. No, Eleanor was safe. And yet, she found she couldn't but think of the child, so new, so pure, without feeling like her face would give her away, and that people would see through her disguise. They *had* to believe she was an unattached, heartless killer, or her daughter would likely end up as leverage against her.

Just as I'm being used as leverage against my own mentor. Honestly, she didn't mind that so much. Typhis was an excellent trainer, top-flight killer, and ruthless to a fault. He was, however, also scum.

Hastily, but carefully, donning her formal guild attire, Anedel gave herself a once over in the full-length mirror sitting next to her armoire. She looked positively lethal. *Perfect*, she thought, smiling. *They'll never suspect a thing.*

After tonight's ceremony, her cut of the payments would increase, and that meant more money to send to her sister. It meant her sister could finally move herself and Eleanor out into the country, possibly even into a nice cottage, as opposed to the filthy human hovels the elven lords had assigned her people at the heart of this city. Though Anedel longed to be close to her child, she desired her daughter's safety above her own.

And yet, the increase of pay meant increased responsibilities and dangers. She swallowed, remembering that she had accepted the likelihood that she would never live to see her daughter grow to womanhood. But she'd do her *utmost* to try, and *that* had driven her to excel well past any of the other greenhorns she'd been brought into the guild with. Tonight, she would be formally accepted as one of the best.

Checking her appearance again, she slipped her ceremonial daggers into her sash, and turned for the door. She'd been forced to trade the lives of others for the life of her girl. The ceremony would merely seal the deal.

So be it.

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could take her blood oath, but they didn't. And so she waited. And waited. And waited. Until finally, they came,

Chapter 6 by Fay Sojourner



She didn't like the look on their faces. She was expecting them be happy for her, not disappointed, right? "Anedel Alariack," Sir Typhis spoke, "We have some matters to discuss." Anedel's heart sank to her gut. "What matters?"

"You said that you kill the elf prince, is that correct?"

"Yes. Yes, I did."

"Did you pierce his heart?" Anedel blinked. "What?"

"Did you pierce his heart?"

"What do you mean?"

"To properly kill an elf, you must pierce its heart. Then, and only then, it would die. Our resources tell us you shot his gut."

"But I shot the arrow straight through his back! No one can possibly survive that! It's unlikely!"

"For a human, It is. Yet for an elf, not so much."

"But he should be dead! I mean, he stopped breathing, and he lost so much of blood! You saw the head!"

"The head, we discover, was an illusion."

"An illusion?! It was a head! I brought the corpse back to the liar then demanded a slave to cut off his head and put it in a bag to bring to you—"

"A slave? Which slave?"

"A brownie, sir. One of the ones that we captured. I'd used for bait because—"

"A brownie? What did it looked like? Did it have a scar on its left cheek?"

"Yes, it did, but that's not—"

"That little traitor! I forgotten how loyal it is to its master!"

"Huh?"

"The prince's brownie! Why did you give him to it?!"

"Well, we assassins make people suffer, so I made the brownie cut off his head because of their

close friendship, but I needed to get clean up to present to you, so I had the thing heavily guarded."

"So that's how he escaped! The brownie helped!"

"Escaped?!"

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"And very much alive because of your foolishness, girl! Which brings you to your next task." He tossed her bow and arrows to her. "Kill him the right way. Bring us his head, or you'll never join us."

Anedel couldn't believe it. That stupid elf prince was still... Alive?! That ment she had to track him down again!

But had to be dead...

Anedel cursed. She knew that Typhis was right. How could she be such an idiot?

"Finish it." Typhis hissed.

Anedel packed her things for the mission. Never have she felt so humiliated and gullible. She didn't know that elves can't be killed by shooting through their stomach, even if it makes them looked dead. Or that miserable brownie was going to deceive her and succeed; thus, the elf prince escaped and was far away.

As Anedel tried up her knapsack, something caught her eye. She reached over and picked the object up. It was a small statue of Lumani, the goddess of dreams and visions. The idol was gift from her mother when she was little. Anedel was told that it would show bits of the future of those who possessed it. She wasted years trying to know her fortune from it, but the figure did nothing.

Anedel sighed as she examed the ornate statue, remembering how she waited for it to do something. She closed her eyes, still holding the idol of the goddess and wishing that none of this had never happened. Then the craziest thing happened. She had a vision... sort of. In it, Anedel heard a familiar voice, a voice that she never hope to hear again. 'Anedel,' it said, 'I know you for too long. I know that you aren't a murderer, and I know you won't kill me.'

'Don't you get it?!' She heard herself say, 'I've been ordered to! I have to!'

'You don't! Please Anedel... Just put down the bow.'

'If I let you live, they'll kick me out, and I won't be an assassin! I'll have nowhere to go!'

'You don't need to be with them to have a home.'

'Why? Why don't I have to?! I have no other home! I have no one else except for them!'

'You have me! You're my friend! And you're still are! Even after all this madness! Anedel, please. Come with me.'

Then the vision went away leaving Anedel confused! What was that?

Anedel shrugged it off and put the statue away. She had an elf prince to hunt.

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